

A BRIEF
AND
UTTERLY FASCINATING
HISTORY OF
The Woldert-Spence Manor



INTRODUCTION

When Lisa and I took over the Manor in 2008, we found ourselves in an awkward position. We needed to be the world's foremost experts on this old house – not to mention the Woldert family – and we needed to become so literally overnight.

There was precious little information: the main house had been listed as a Tyler Historic Landmark, the previous owners (Richard and Patricia Heaton) had written a one page history of the Manor, and during the bedlam of the transition, Patricia had told me verbally a little bit about the family tree. A few Woldert family photos and mementos were sprinkled around the Manor.

Not much to go on. When the dust settled and the reins were finally in our hands, we didn't really even have a clear idea after whom all the rooms were named, save that they were members of the Woldert family.

To remedy my ignorance, over the next year I embarked on a mission to re-discover for myself the history of the house and the history of the Woldert family that built it. It's a history that interweaves itself with that of Tyler and East Texas, starting well before the Civil War.

It's also a history that took me in an unexpected direction.

As it turns out, a good part of the information that had been passed down about the Manor appears to be simply wrong. What follows here is what I hope is close to the actual history of the Woldert-Spence Manor, derived from as many original sources as I could find. The most important of these original sources is a biography of John George Woldert by his son William, found safely tucked away in the archives of the Smith County Historical Society¹.

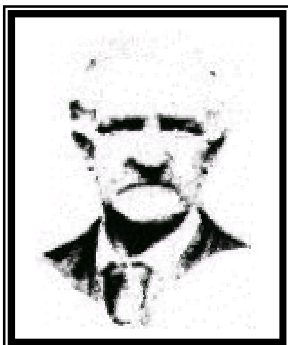
So for the last two years I've been inadvertently telling our guests an incorrect history of the house. Even the date on our sign – 1859 – appears to be incorrect. But that doesn't worry me.

History, like this house, evolves over time.

Chris Garrett
June 2010

¹ Woldert, Will. A., Sr. 1935. *Biography of John George Woldert, 1814-1887, Tyler, Texas*. August 15, 1935. Archives of the Smith County Historical Society. Unless noted otherwise, all quotations throughout this document are from this biography.

INTO TEXAS CAME A MAN...



Any history of this house — correct or incorrect — has to necessarily start with just one man: John George Woldert. John George is the patriarch of the Woldert family and inarguably the family's most fascinating member. In the end, it turns out he's not quite as important to the history of this particular house as originally thought — but I just have to tell you about him anyway. He's really that interesting...

John George Woldert was born on July 18, 1814 in the small village of Adorf in the Kingdom of Saxony (now part of Germany). He must have had an imposing presence, as attested by his son William: "He was 6 ft. 2 in. in height...broad-shouldered, deep voice, dark bushy hair, blue eyes, always walked with a lengthy step, upright and manly, wore a 7¼ hat and a No. 11 shoe..."

Nestled among the Elstergebirge mountains and laying alongside the Weisse Elster River, Adorf sits in a wide valley, cut by streams and brooks and heavily forested. Yet for all its charm, to a young man of John George's temperament it must have seemed most confining, and at age 21 he set his sights on leaving Adorf for "The Star of the West" — Texas.

Unfortunately, his father — a woodworker named Johnn Got Lobe — had slightly different plans for his son, and John George found himself instead enlisted as an engineer in the Prussian Army. He didn't spend long as a soldier, though, and secured a medical discharge for "varicose veins" in both of his legs (a medical problem that his son William says mysteriously didn't bother his father for the rest of his long life). Trained by his father, John George settled down to a life as a cabinet maker and woodworker in Adorf.

Then trouble came a-knocking.

As William tells it, John George had just finished "a handsome inlaid veneered combination desk and bookcase," having been ordered and paid for by one of his best customers. A nobleman walking by the shop saw this exquisite desk in the window. In 1837 the Kingdom of Saxony was far from being a democratic place, and the nobleman ordered that the desk to be sent over to his estate. John George protested and came near to being arrested for his refusal, but friends intervened and it was thought the matter was dropped. That night, however, the shop was broken into and trashed. The desk for which John George had fought disappeared.

Disgusted with this arbitrary abuse of power, John George studied English at nights and over the next year finally convinced his parents that he ought to emigrate to the New World. In October 1838 he left Adorf, bound for New York by ship.

John George's interest in Texas wasn't accidental. A classmate of his, Dr. Seibold, had been expelled from Saxony for political reasons and had settled in "the wilds of Jasper County" in the Republic of Texas, near the town of Belgrade (Belgrade sits – or rather sat – on the banks of the Neches River, near the Texas/Louisiana line, about 100 miles southeast of Nacogdoches). Once he landed in New York, John George's skills were recognized and he started working for C.F. Martin & Sons making pianos, guitars, and violins, meeting with great success and quickly becoming foreman of the factory. But his classmate out in Texas stayed on his mind. John George struck up a friendship with Henry Fischer, who intended to start a colony in Texas. Fischer desperately wanted John George's help, but in the end they simply couldn't agree on how the colony would be handled. Bidding farewell to his friend and to his lucrative job in New York, John George sailed for Texas by himself. He landed in Galveston on November 5, 1839.

He didn't stay long. Galveston was just a small coastal village then, and John George had the misfortune to land in the midst of a raging outbreak of Yellow Fever. Not even staying a day, John George started walking northeast out of Galveston, his aim to find Dr. Seibold's cabin somewhere in the piney woods of East Texas.

East Texas was not a friendly place back in 1839: a wilderness of heavy pine and hardwood forest, criss-crossed by streams and sloughs, choked with underbrush and swamps, thinly populated and haunted by roving bands of Indians. But John George had grown up in the mountains and forest of Saxony; he was a born woodsman. Before long, traveling by foot with his bags slung over his shoulders, he found Dr. Seibold's homestead. He was welcomed with open arms and settled in.

INDIAN SUMMER

In addition to his old classmate, here he also met George W. Smythe, the chief surveyor appointed to survey the line between the United States (specifically the State of Louisiana) and the Republic of Texas. Smythe couldn't help but have noticed John George carrying the only piece of woodwork he had saved from his shop in Adorf—a “beautifully inlaid, veneered engineers instrument case which he had made.” Smythe prevailed on John George to join the survey party, and in 1840 they began surveying north.

The survey was never completed—disagreement arose among the various engineers as to exactly where the Sabine River crossed the line of 32 degrees latitude, the point that was to mark the Texas/Louisiana line. John George eventually said goodbye to the crumbling survey party, and set out back towards Belgrade, traveling alone and by foot.

But once again, trouble found him.

John George made it as far as Shelby County (northeast of Nacogdoches), when he was spotted by one of the bands of Indians that roamed Texas. They captured John George and tied his hands tightly behind his back with buckskin thongs. The Indians, dragging along the hapless surveyor, headed south following the old Spanish Camino Real—the network of trails and roads stretching between Nacogdoches and San Antonio. While the Indians “treated him kindly”, John George must have despaired as they followed the King's Highway farther and farther southwest, and farther and farther from Belgrade and the cabin of Dr. Seibold. Traveling well over two hundred miles, the party crossed in turn the Angelina, Neches, Trinity, and Brazos Rivers. Then one evening near Bastrop, as they prepared to cross yet another river—the Colorado—John George finally got the chance he was waiting for.

After pushing through a Texas summer rainstorm, the Indians decided to make camp. As usual, they bedded themselves on the ground and left their captive tied up under the watchful eye of one lone sentry. The sentry set his back against a pecan tree, and knowing his captive was safely trussed, began to drift off. John George watched the Indian surreptitiously as the man's chin sank lower and lower. Unbeknownst to his captors, John George had been busy that afternoon—as soon as the earlier rain had hit the buckskin thongs, he'd furtively started working the cords, stretching them while they were wet and pliable. Now, with dark falling and his sentry dozing, John George slipped his hands free. He slid to his belly. Inch by inch he crept away from the camp, thankful the leaves were damp so as not rustle

with his passing. As soon as he felt safe, he got to his feet and ran, putting as much distance as he could between the Indians and himself.

Once again, John George found himself crossing the wilds of Texas, but this time “without arms to shoot game, matches to kindle fires, not even a pocket knife or change of clothes.” He traveled by night, sleeping in trees. He set his course by the stars. He looked for thicker moss on the north part of trees, lighter bark and bigger branches on the south. He knew all the rivers in the region flowed south towards the Gulf and that the sun always cast its shadow to the north. Slowly he counted up these clues and set an eastward course. He ate grapes, roots, wood-sorrels, wild onions. He ransacked bird’s nests for their eggs and swallowed them raw. He waded and then swam back over the Brazos, the Trinity, and the Neches Rivers. He walked through cactus, mesquite, post oaks, and finally, pines. And two weeks later – and likely a bit thinner – he once again knocked on Dr. Seibold’s door.

A MAN OF WORTH

John George regained his strength, feasting on “broiled venson [sic], squirrel pies, game and fish, with simple native vegetables, drinking strong black coffee, eating old fashioned lye hominy, corn pone bread, which had been baked in ovens.”

While recuperating and having had his fill of adventure, John George must have turned his thoughts to how he was going to build a life for himself in Texas. So one day, his strength recovered, John George walked down into Belgrade and slapped down \$400 cash to buy nine lots, totaling about 1.6 acres. And a Texas real estate investor was born.

Actually, it was an inauspicious start. William says his father never sold those lots, and the town of Belgrade eventually withered and all but disappeared back into the Texas forest.

Undaunted, in November 1840, John George said goodbye to his friend Dr. Seibold and moved on to San Augustine. There he purchased two lots, one for his home and one for a new cabinet shop. Once again, John George turned his capable hands to woodworking, and once again he prospered, counting among his friends in San Augustine such notable citizens as General Sam Houston and Judge Thomas Jefferson Rusk.

Was John George a Mason?

We don't know, but it appears to be likely. Judge Rusk was a well-known Mason, as was Sam Houston. Many prominent Texans at the time were Masons—during the Republic, some 80 percent of higher offices were held by Masons.^A

But the most interesting clue comes from the label of one of John George's bottles of homemade native Texas wine (see page 12), which bears the “crown and cross” symbol—a well-known Mason symbol that still graces Tyler's Mason hall to this day. Granted, this was a common symbol for the Lutheran church as well, of which John George was a member.

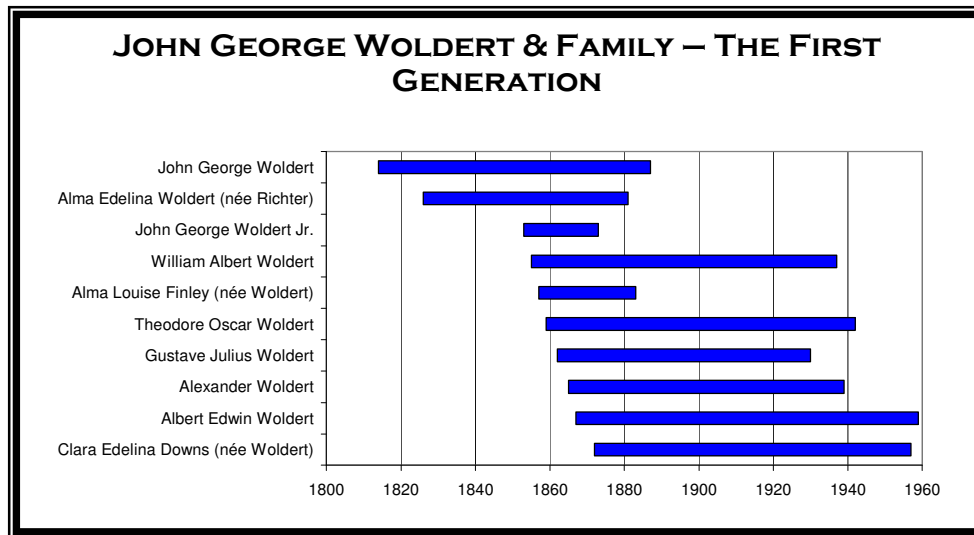
But one has to wonder...

^A Handbook of Texas Online
(www.tshaonline.org)

In 1842, John George requested 320 acres of land from the Land Board of San Augustine County; the laws of the Republic of Texas allowed for this amount to be given to any single man immigrating to Texas, provided he stay a resident for three years. In 1846 John George was awarded his 320 acres. Around this time, having heard that the Texas legislature was forming a new county (Smith) and a new town (Tyler) out of the existing Nacogdoches district, far-sighted John George also purchased about 1,920 acres of land located about 6 miles east of present-day Tyler.

His wanderlust returned in 1850, and at age 36, John George closed up shop in San Augustine and set out on a trip back to Adorf. He made good use of this trip—seeing his family again, traveling to see the World's Fair in England, and seemingly as an afterthought, getting

married to Miss Alma Edelina Richter, 12 years his junior and daughter of an old friend in Adorf. With new wife in hand, John George set out in 1852 back to San Augustine, sailing on the *Ernestine*, landing 63 days later in New Orleans.



John George always had an entrepreneurial spirit. Returning to San Augustine, he opened up a photo studio, making use of a state-of-the-art daguerreotype rig he had purchased in London – among other notables, he was believed to have taken the last known portrait of Sam Houston. His first son, John George Woldert, Jr. was born in San Augustine on March 4, 1853. Shortly thereafter, John George again decamped from San Augustine. Retracing the same route he had followed as an Indian captive 13 years before, John George moved his burgeoning young family to San Antonio, near the many German settlements of Texas hill country.

In San Antonio, John George decided to turn his hand towards retail, in addition to still taking portraits and building cabinets. For the next six years he “did an Importing from Europe handling German wines and beers, Swiss cheese, fancy drawn work, laces, musical instruments, and glass ware.” He did very well. By this time, he had also amassed an incredible amount of land holdings – if the list in his biography is accurate, by 1856 John George owned over 20,000 acres of Texas land.

But he had a problem – his land in East Texas. Immigrants were pouring into East Texas during this time, and unless evicted, they would squat on whatever land they came across. So for a final time, John George moved, this time packing his wife and three children (John George Jr., William Albert, and Alma Louisa), arriving in Tyler in 1859.

John George rented a house (the Isaac Renfro house) for his family at the northwest corner of Bonner Street (then Mulberry Street) and Woldert Street (then Fan Street),

where his son Theodore Oscar was born in 1859, and then purchased a 3-acre tract of land located east of Vine Street and stretching between Front Street and Fan Street. The earliest map we have of Tyler – from 1884 – shows his land, as well as the likely house they lived in – but we'll talk more about the house later.

The War of Northern Aggression

So where did the Woldert family fall when the war started in earnest in 1861?

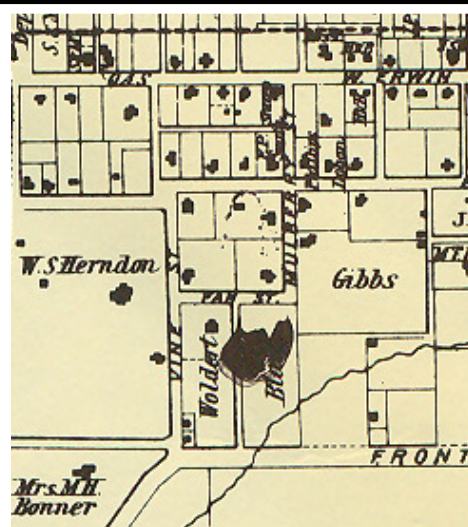
None of John George's sons were old enough to serve, John George Jr. being only 8 when the war started. John George himself was called to duty once: in 1863 there were fears that the Union soldiers imprisoned at Camp Ford – just east of Tyler – were plotting to overpower the Confederate guards. John George was called along with all other men in the County to help guard the prison.

Just like in 1835, John George ended up with a medical discharge. This time it wasn't for varicose veins – and I think it's fair to say that he deserved all the consideration he could get:

"We have this day examined J.G. Woldert, 49 years of age, and find him incapable of performing military duty for the following reasons: Excessive Hemorrhoids and Chronic Enterites." (August 2, 1863)

"I have this day...examined the said J.G. Woldert and find him incompetent to perform Military Duty in the field of the following reasons, vis: Permanent disability because of hemorrhoids excessive, proper purulent discharges from rectum. Myopsis confirmed." (July 6, 1864)

Though not actively serving, as a member of the Confederate army, John George had to be paroled by the United States on August 3rd, 1865. On August 18, 1865 he swore the oath of amnesty to affirm his loyalty to the United States, and on September 4, 1865 his rights were re-affirmed as a voter and resident of Smith County.

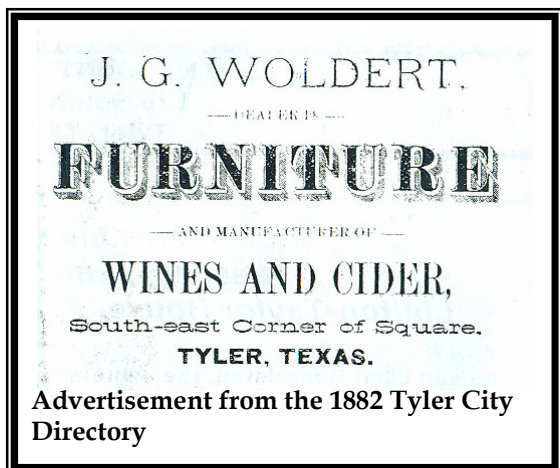


Gray's 1884 map of Tyler. John George owned three acres between Fan and Front Streets, just east of Vine Street. The house shown just south of Fan Street is likely the original dog-trot style Woldert house. The house at the northwest corner of Mulberry and Fan is the Isaac Renfro residence rented by the Wolderts in 1859. The house at the northeast corner of Fan and Vine may or may not be the structure that today is the Woldert-Spence Manor.

John George settled permanently on this property. Four more children followed: Gustave Julius (1862), Alexander (1865), Edwin Albert (1867), and Clara Edalina (1872).

Cabinet maker, soldier, surveyor, land baron, photographer – whatever he had done previously, when he arrived in Tyler John George settled on "merchant" as his profession. From 1860 to 1875, on the north side of Tyler's square, he ran "an

importing business of laces, embroideries, fancy goods, musical instruments, toys, wines, and beers; also imported Bohemian glassware.” He moved to the west side of the square in 1875; unfortunately his store burned in 1879. Buying property on the southeast corner of the square, he moved again (these buildings also burned, in 1889). In 1860, John George Woldert was reportedly worth about \$36,000² – that’s probably close to \$3 million today.



John George lived the rest of his life in Tyler, raising his children, living in the house on Fan Street, playing accordion on the front porch in the evenings, and running his store. His life in Tyler was not without sorrow. He buried his first son John George, Jr., only 20 years old in 1873, then his wife 8 years later (1881), and his first daughter (1883). He passed away himself in 1887, at age 73, “quiet and peacefully” at his home on Fan Street.

John George Woldert is buried in Oakwood Cemetery, only a mile from where he lived and worked. His sons erected a beautiful grave marker, designed by William, still one of the most spectacular in the cemetery.

And just like John George in life, it’s big and it’s complicated. Carved of Italian and Georgian marbles by the famous sculptor Andrea Jardella of Cavvara, Italy, the grave marker is over thirteen feet high and weighs over seven tons.

“The style is a double column, with an arched top. On top of this arch stands the life sized figure of the Goddess of Flowers, beautifully wrought with a master hand in snow white marble, distributing flowers, typical of Mrs. Woldert’s love and kindness...Around the foot of this figure stand four urns, representing the four seasons, all gracefully wreathed with flowers



² Smallwood, J. *The History of Smith County Texas, Vol 1*, p. 123

from Spring to Winter...

The inscription, "Our Parents", in center of arch, is relieved on left by a bunch of Lillies, on the right by a cluster of Roses, and below by a spray of Imortelle Vine. Above the inscription is a bunch of Grapes, most typical of Mr. Woldert, the pioneer in the culture of grapes in our section...

At the foot of the graves rests a plain, solid piece of white marble, on which is inscribed the chaste lines:

We Know Not Where His Islands Lift
Their Fronded Palms in Air
We Only Know Ye Cannot Drift
Beyond His Love and Care"³

But before he shuffled off this mortal coil, John George added one final profession to his resume...

³ Tyler Daily Dispatch, September 21, 1896, as quoted in William's *Biography*.

“THE PURE JUICE OF THE GRAPE”

The history of wine-making in Texas is relatively well known. The groundbreaking work of Thomas Volney Munson of Denison in classifying and then hybridizing native Texas grapes with European varietals famously saved the European wine industry, which had been devastated by outbreaks of disease in the nineteenth century.

But Munson didn't come to Texas until 1876, and by that time others had already been experimenting with native Texas grapes and wine-making. John George may or may not have been the very first to make wine from native Texas grapes but he certainly appears to have been one of the earliest to do so and probably the most successful.

The Spanish first attempted growing grapes and making wine in Texas, ostensibly for sacramental purposes, as early as the 1660s, particularly around El Paso⁴. The Franciscans primarily grew Mission grapes brought in from Spain, and while these vineyards reportedly thrived, the Texas climate was hard on most attempts to import and grow European varieties. C.E. Bauer of Fayette county writes in 1868: “Of the transatlantic vines the greater part do not prosper here; some species will bear and ripen tolerably, but only for table use, as they are never reliable enough to be raised for the wine-press.”⁵

John George arrived in Texas in 1839 during the first great wave of immigration. Stephen F. Austin had only brought the first colony to Texas in 1821, and the hill country German immigrant towns like Fredericksburg and New Braunfels – the heart of present-day Texas wine country – weren't settled until 1845. The first whispers that Texas might have potential for wine-making cropped up in the 1860s, but it wasn't until the 1880s that widespread experimentation and vine-growing began. The oldest operating winery in Texas – the Val Verde winery in Del Rio, west of San Antonio – dates from 1883. John George's experiments in making wine from native Texas grapes predates this by at least two decades, first mentioned in 1864.

European vines had a tough time in Texas, but Texas was blessed with a large number of native grape varieties. Four in particular stand out in early writings: Mustang, Post-oak, Muscadine, and Winter. Other imported American varietals

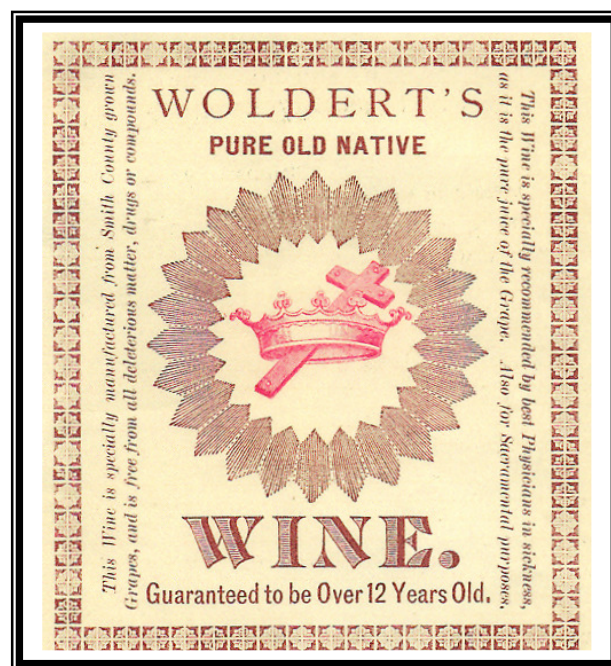
⁴ English, Sarah Jane. *The Wines of Texas*, Fourth Edition. Eakin Press, Austin, Texas.

⁵ Dodge, J.R. Monthly Reports of the Department of Agriculture for the Year 1868.

also thrived: the Scuppernong from North Carolina, the Warren from Georgia, and the Catawba, also from North Carolina.

John George started experimenting with the native Post-Oak grape in 1864, but apparently tried most of the varieties. In 1881, Oran Milo Roberts, the Governor of Texas, writes that "One [Scuppernong] vine covering ninety feet square, upon the premises of Mr. J.G. Woldret [sic], in the city of Tyler, produced in one year (1873) twenty-eight gallons of good wine."⁶ Elsewhere we read that "The varieties of grapes cultivated by Mr. Woldert are as follows: The Scuppernong, Herbemont, Catawba, Isabella, and Concord. From one vine of the Scuppernong, planted in 1864, he made last year forty-eight gallons of wine. He also makes a very drinkable wine out of wild grapes."⁷

Drinkable indeed. The New Orleans Times writes about John George's wines: "We have recently been favored with a sample of pure native wine manufactured in 1864 and 1867. These wines so different in quality and character and a body in them and delicacy of flavor, which strongly recommends them, especially to the ailing. One sample – Catawba, though greatly superior to anything of the kind, we had ever tasted. The Issabella and Tokay are also rich, strong and grapey, and fully show the capability of Texas as a wine country."⁸



Between John George's own words, and William's remembrances, we probably have one of the most detailed early accounts of making wine in Texas:

"Smith County woods were thickly over grown with grape vines and the small timber loaded down each year with bunches of grapes. The grapes and berries would be gathered...and brought to the plant in bushel baskets, where they would be crushed, and the pulp poured into large wooden vats, to be later run through the press...The juice, after running through the press and two pounds of more or less yellow clarified sugar added for each gallon of juice. The juice would then go to the

⁶ Roberts, O.M. 1881. *A Description of Texas, Its Advantages and Resources with Some Account of their Development, Past, Present and Future*

⁷ The South Western Immigration Company. 1881. *Texas: Her Resources and Capabilities: Being a Description of the State of Texas and the Inducements She Offers to Those Seeking Homes in a New Country.*

⁸ This description comes from William's *Biography*, and is attributed to the New Orleans Times.

cellar, poured into sound wooden oak barrels, which had been previously “fumed” with sulphur...and left to settle for about 6 weeks...then drawn off from the “lees”, or settling. The clear wine would be poured back into a clean wooden barrel filled perfectly full and left undisturbed for about 6 months.”

It was quite a large operation: “...Mr. Woldert has about forty barrels of fine wine, of various kinds made out of the native Texas grape.”⁹ And John George was not only an enterprising vintner, but an equal-opportunity one – he also made wine from tomatoes, blackberries, apples, peaches, plums and apricots.

⁹ Dallas Austin Republican, January 28, 1869, as reported in the *Chronicles of the Smith County Historical Society*, Volume 26, Number 2, page 49.

DOG TROT...OR NOT?

Anyway, as interesting a life as John George led, there is still the minor question of the Manor itself – when was it built and by whom?

The history of the Manor that we inherited was this: *John George settled on this property in 1859. He built the Victorian downstairs we see today in 1884, constructed dog-trot style from two cabins that were on the property. The second story was added later, well after the turn of the century.*

Much of this description comes from family recollections, and certainly there are elements of truth in there. But it doesn't appear to quite be the real story.

Recall that after arriving in Tyler in 1859, John George bought three acres east of Vine, between Front and Woldert Streets (see the 1884 map on page 8) – William refers to this land throughout his biography as the Beaird lot, since his father bought it in 1860 from J. Pat. Beaird. “It lays south of Old Fan (now Woldert) the Old Brownsboro and Athens road, now Vine Avenue, ran on the west. With Front Street on the south.” And this is where John George stayed the rest of his days: “Father died at his home on the Beaird lot on Sunday, April 3, 1887...”

In other words, John George apparently never lived north of Woldert Street where the present-day Manor sits.

So what do we know about the home on the Beaird lot? One Mrs. James P. Douglas recounts going to school with “George and Will” (placing this probably in the 1860s), and recalls that “The Woldert family lived in a cottage on what is now Woldert Street.”¹⁰ In his biography, William indicates that “Father enlarged the first two rooms with a deep cellar underneath.” The footprint of that house is likely shown on the 1884 map.

During the restoration of the Manor in the 1990s, Woldert family members reiterated the family lore that the present-day Manor was a dog-trot style formed from two cabins put together – but based on William's biography of his father, to me it appeared the family members were actually recounting the first Woldert house that used to lie south of Woldert Street, not the Manor that lies north of Woldert Street.

¹⁰ “Recollection of a Centenarian,” by Mrs. James P. Douglas. *Chronicles of the Smith County Historical Society*, Volume 5, Number 1, p. 43.

But were my suspicions correct? After all, if you're going to rewrite history, you better be darn sure you're correct.

For two years, I nursed my reservations about the dog-trot theory. Physically, things just didn't quite add up for me. Look around the Manor – do you know any 1859 cabins that had 12-foot ceilings? Structurally, the pier-and-beam foundation of the Manor is consistent in its construction and the beams run all the way across the house; likewise, there are no traces of any previous cabin foundations. Dog-trot houses typically have a central hallway (what used to be the breezeway between the original cabins), but that isn't so with the Manor, despite what you might observe today. Before the restoration the front door opened directly into the parlor and the back door opened directly into a mud room. The separation of the parlor and the hallway only came in the 1990s; there was no original central hallway.

The physical clues just didn't fit the history.

In addition, I just never could figure out *why* John George would have built this house. At the time the Victorian downstairs of the Manor was built¹¹ – 1884 – John George was 70 years old and at the end of his full life. Why would a man, in poor health, three years after his wife had passed away and with all of his children well grown, build a new house across the street from the land that he had owned for decades?

Based on all of this – the details in William's biography of his father, the physical construction of the Manor, the inconsistency of the story – my belief is that John George didn't build this house at all.

So who built the Manor?

¹¹ This date comes from the Smith County Appraisal District.

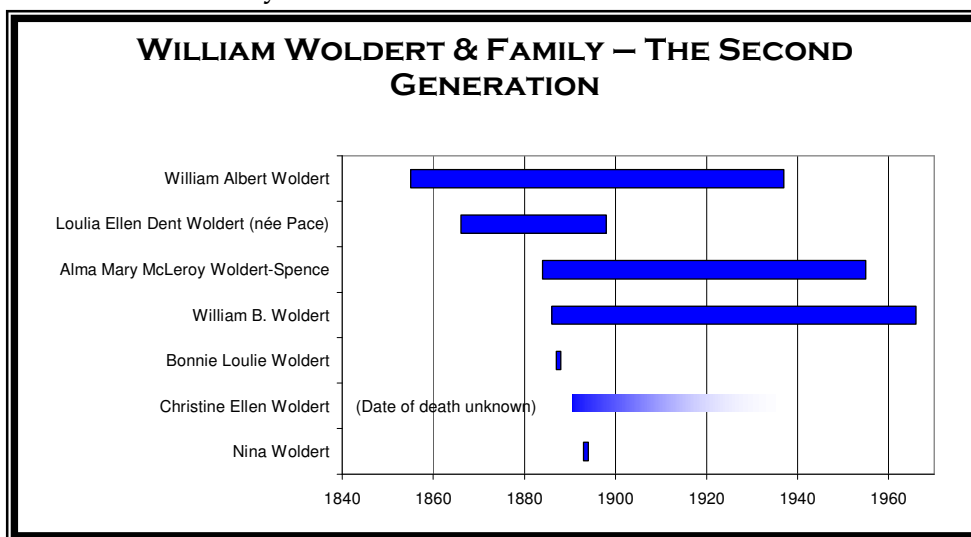
WHERE THERE'S A WILL...

William Albert Woldert.

Second and oldest surviving son of John George, William was born in 1855 in San Antonio, but lived his entire life in Tyler. And whether he intended to or not, his life included many of the same touchstones as his father.

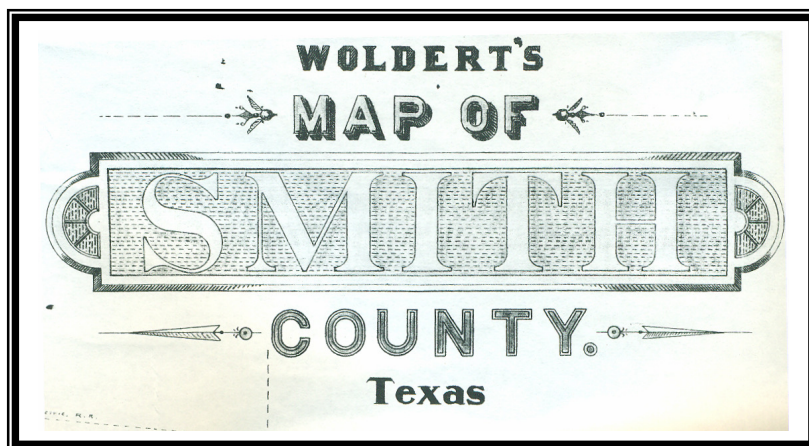
According to 1870 Census records, by age 15 William was working in merchant retail (presumably at his father's store). A

decade later, in 1880, age 24, William's occupation is listed as a cabinetmaker, just like his father before him, and his grandfather back in Saxony.



William married Miss Loulie Ellen Dent Pace (age 17) in 1883 (his father John George also married a woman a decade his junior). Their first daughter, Alma Mary, was reportedly born in the Manor in March 1884.¹² Four more children followed, although two of their daughters were lost as infants.

By 1905 William was a well-known civil engineer and surveyor, publishing a widely used map of Smith County. Boxes of his survey documents stored at the Smith County



Historical Society are reportedly still referenced and used to this day.¹³ William was also a respected historian, writing an 8-volume unpublished work – *East Texas* – not to mention the invaluable biography of his father. William also traveled

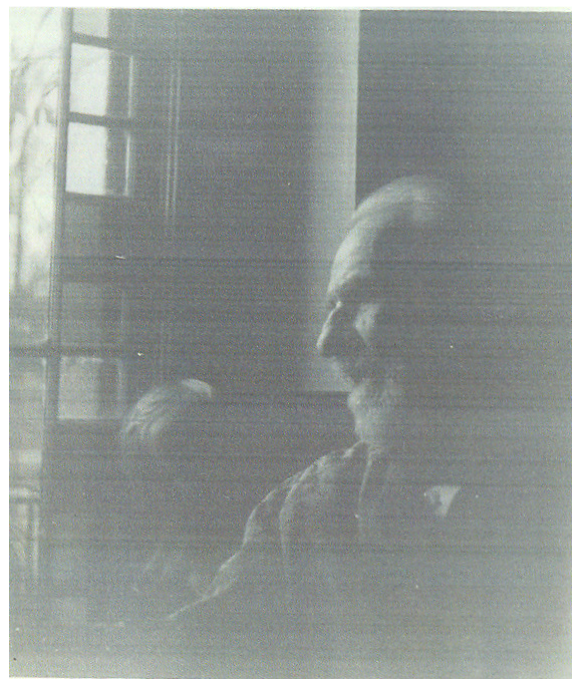
¹² Woldert, Albert. *A History of Tyler and Smith County, Texas*.

¹³ Personal conversation with Mary Jane McNamara, Smith County Historical Society

the world working for his brother Alex. One of Tyler's earliest surviving city directories (1887) lists his occupation as "commercial traveler."¹⁴

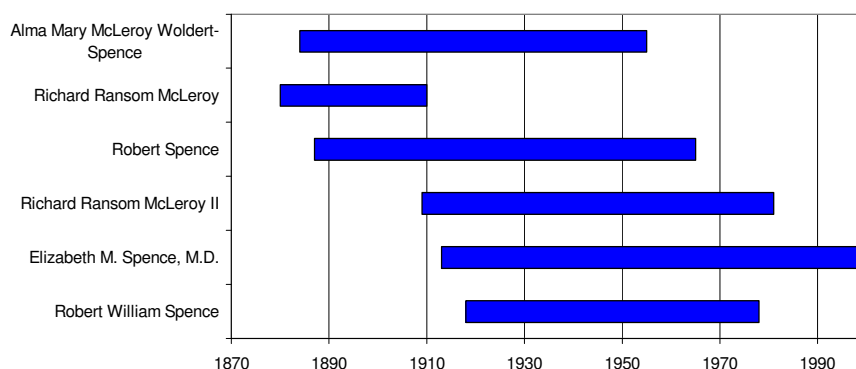
William lived in the house at 611 W. Woldert Street (now the Manor) his entire life. While his wife, Loulie, died in 1887 when she was fairly young – only 32 years old – he had plenty of company in the house. William, now a widower, raised Alma Mary, William Jr., and Clara Edeline, although surely he had plenty of support from the rest of the Woldert family living across the street.

Alma Mary left home and married Richard R. McLeroy, living in El Paso. They had one son, named for his father, before Richard passed away from pneumonia in 1910. Alma Mary came home to Tyler, where she remarried Robert Spence in 1912. They had two more children: Robert Spence Jr. and Elizabeth "Peggy" Spence. All three children lived here at 611 W. Woldert Street. Robert Spence would become mayor of Tyler for a while, but it's Alma Mary that was the celebrity...



William Woldert, taken in 1936 at age 81, in the Parlor. Note the stained-glass windows, looking west across Vine Street

ALMA MARY & FAMILY – THE THIRD GENERATION



¹⁴ Tyler City Directory, 1887, R.L. Polk & Company. Available at City of Tyler Public Library Rare Book Collection.

THE TYLER POET

Alma Mary.

Or Alma Mary McLeroy Woldert Spence, if you want to be precise. Carrying on the family tradition, Alma Mary had a wealth of interests: Organizer and President of the East Texas Tuberculosis Association (she apparently helped Tyler become the hospital center it is today¹⁵), Tyler's Woman of 1954, Honorary President of the Tyler Creative Writers' Club, world traveler, and poet.

Yes, poet. Alma Mary was quite well-known in her time – and not just locally. She published in journals such as the *Kaleidograph*, *Stanza*, and the *Book of the American Poetry Society*. She published two books of poetry: *Silver Doors* in 1936 and *Southward Call* in 1953. Reportedly, she missed becoming the Texas state poet laureate in 1954 by just a single vote.

Alma Mary wrote both of her books here at the Manor – often writing upstairs in the small front room she called “my sunroom.” Her poetry is comfortable and simple, celebrating the delights of childhood and nature.

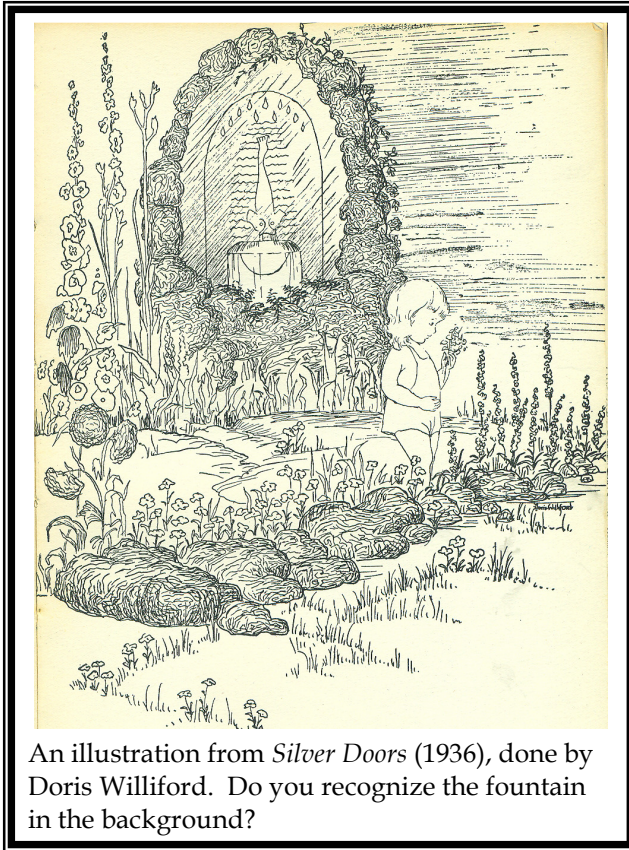
The house slowly emptied. First the children grew up and moved away. Her father William passed away (in this house) in 1937 at the age of 81. Alma Mary passed away in Tyler at age 70 in 1955, and her husband, Robert Spence passed away in 1965 – the last of the family living in the house.



Alma Mary in the backyard of the Manor, taken in 1947. The cat's name is not known.

¹⁵ Alma Mary's obituary, Tyler Courier Times, March 22, 1955.

As you'll read in the next few pages, it was Alma Mary's tenure in the house that made it what it is today – with the exception of the Sunroom, the rooms are named for her, her father, and her children¹⁶. Her inscription from *Silver Doors* perhaps best sums up their happy years here:



To my father,
Peggy,
Richard,
and
My two Bobs

An illustration from *Silver Doors* (1936), done by Doris Williford. Do you recognize the fountain in the background?

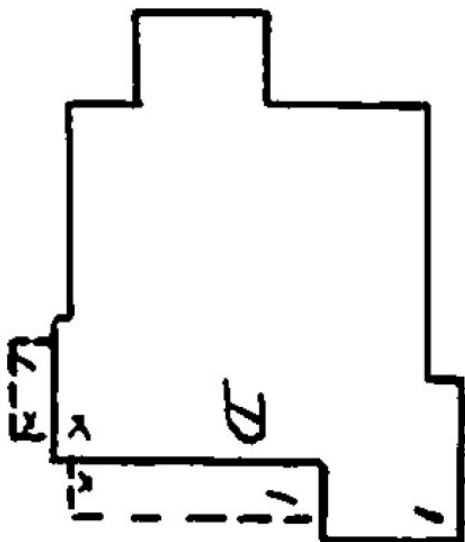
¹⁶ Much of what we know about Alma Mary's family living in the house comes from her daughter Elizabeth. Elizabeth moved to California and became a medical doctor, but she fortuitously was visiting Tyler during the restoration and shared her memories of growing up here.

HOW IT ALL CAME TOGETHER

On the next few pages, you can see the progression of the house — as best we know it — through the years. Aside from some exterior porch changes, there appear to have been four major renovations to the house:

- Between 1907 and 1912, a room and a porch were added to the east side of the house. This probably would have been just before Alma Mary came back home to live. The addition was supposedly William's study. This probably was also when electricity and plumbing came into the house.
- Between 1928 and 1938, the upper floor was added to the house. Recall that Alma Mary had returned home and remarried, and between the two marriages there were three children, plus her father living in the house. Clearly they just needed more space.
- Between 1938 and the 1990s, a bathroom was added to the east side of the house, and the original bathroom for the downstairs was expanded. This almost certainly happened before 1965 when Robert Spence passed away. After 1965, the house and carriage houses became rental housing. From 1966 through 1979, the main house was rented by a local family — the Womacks. During the 1980s, it was rented by an extended Hispanic family. Almost no work or upkeep was done on the house during this time, leaving it in fairly dismal shape when the Heatons purchased it in 1991.
- And of course, in the 1990s the house was renovated as we see it today.

1898

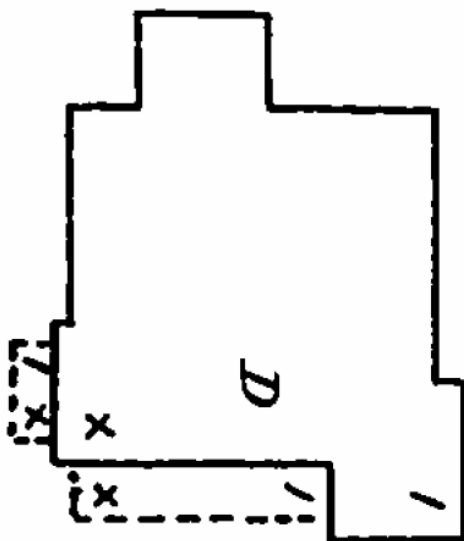


This image from the 1898 Sanborn map is the earliest record we have showing the footprint of the house. When first built in 1884, the house had only a single story (odd for a Victorian home).

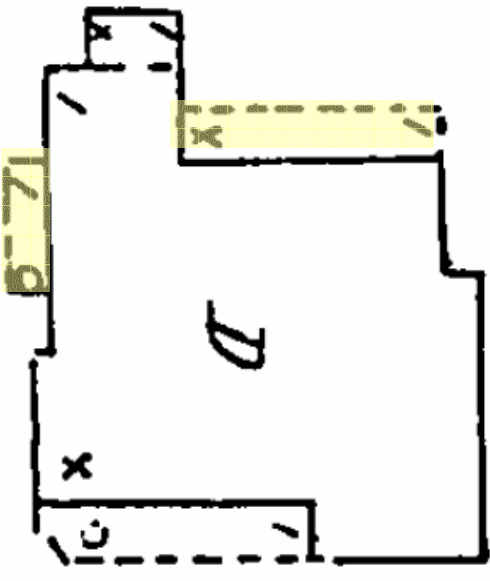
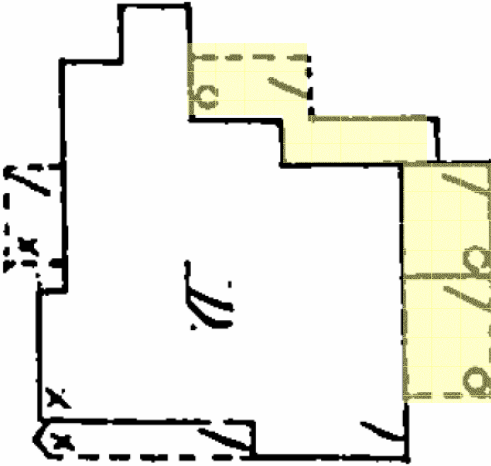

At the time, there were two covered porches (shown by the dashed lines) – the large front porch, and a small porch accessed through the stained glass window/doors on the west side of the parlor.

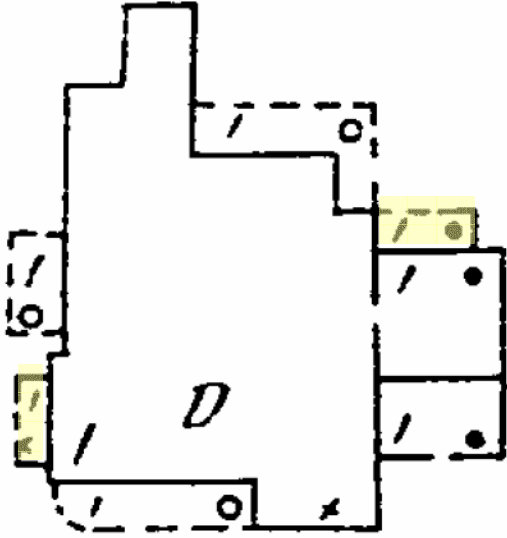
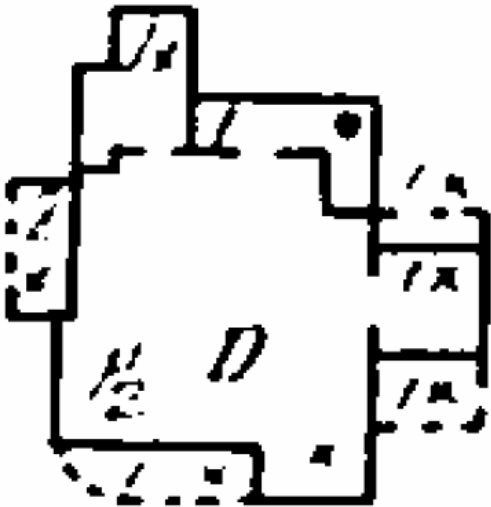
(The small “1” marks on the Sanborn map denote how many floors there are, and the “X” marks indicate that the roof was constructed of wood shingles – remember that Sanborn maps were mainly drawn for fire insurance purposes.)

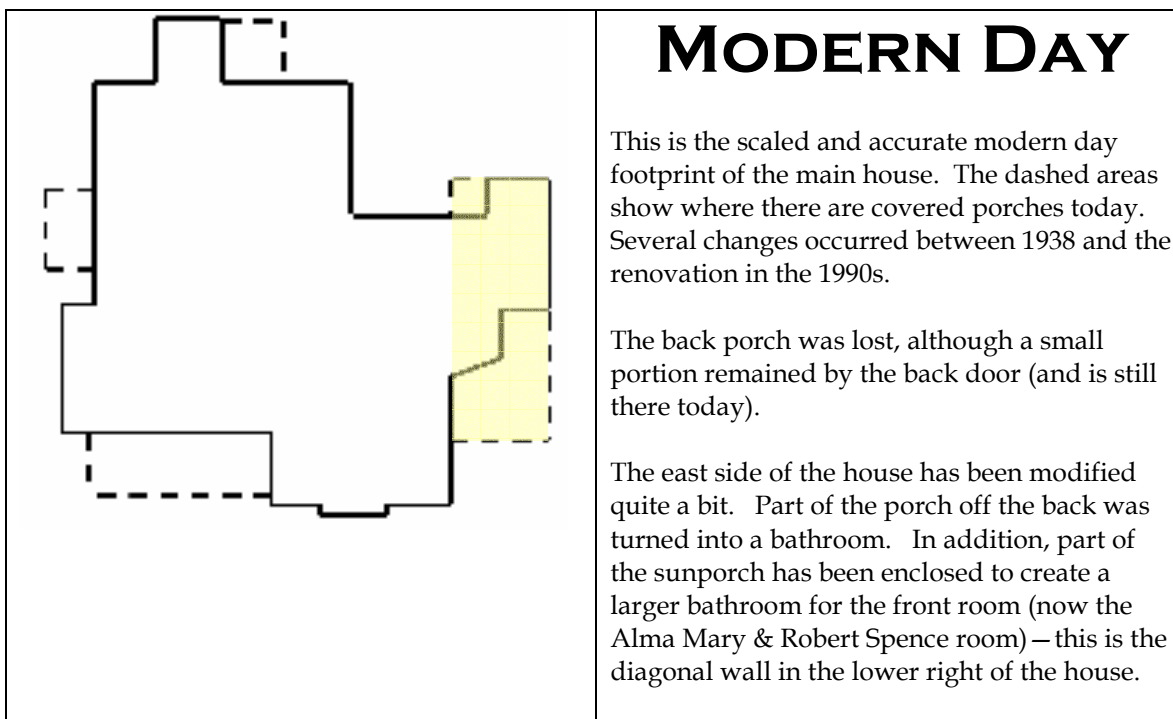
1902



No changes are evident between 1898 and 1902.

| | |
|---|---|
|  | <h2 style="text-align: center;">1907</h2> <p>The 1907 map is a bit more detailed, and there appears to have been some work done. First, the porch off the west side of the dining room has been added. (The "o" indicates that it had a non-combustible roof like metal, tile, or asbestos shingles).</p> <p>The front porch is still shown, but the porch off the west side of the parlor has been removed (or maybe Sanborn decided it didn't warrant being called a porch).</p> <p>Off the back of the house, there appears to be quite a long back porch added by 1907.</p> |
|  | <h2 style="text-align: center;">1912</h2> <p>By 1912, the first major addition to the house appears to have been completed. On the east side, a single room has been added to the house (today this is a private office we use for storage), and adjacent to it the sunporch off of the front room has also been added.</p> <p>The back porch has been modified as well, likely having been extended to the door of the new addition.</p> |
|  | <h2 style="text-align: center;">1919</h2> <p>A little poorer quality image, but basically the house appears unchanged between 1912 and 1919.</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
|  | <h2 style="text-align: center;">1928</h2> <p>While the house is essentially unchanged, the 1928 Sanborn map is of better quality and we can make out a little more detail on the back porch. It likely is actually two porches—the long L-shaped porch no longer exists, but the smaller porch to the east is probably the porch just off of the private office.</p> <p>Mysteriously, Sanborn has added back in the porch off of the parlor...but only for this year.</p> <p>Note that in 1928, the house is still only a single story.</p> |
|  | <h2 style="text-align: center;">1938</h2> <p>Between 1928 and 1938, the second major addition to the house was completed—the addition of the second story (which Sanborn indicates with the “1 1/2” notation in the lower left corner).</p> <p>Otherwise, the footprint of the house and all the porches remained the same.</p> <p>All subsequent maps for Tyler show the same house with no changes.</p> |



AND THOSE CARRIAGE HOUSES?

First off, we'll admit that the term "carriage house" is perhaps a bit of poetic license. As far as we know, there never were any actual carriages or horses in residence. Actually, when built in 1935 the official term used for the structures was "garage apartments."

The East Texas Oil Field hit in late 1930 and early 1931. Located east of Tyler, the field developed rapidly, and by the mid-thirties the oil boom had come to East Texas in a big way. Towns like Kilgore sat right among the oil derricks, the air thick with smoke and the streets thicker with mud. Tyler, meanwhile, sat a comfortable twenty miles distant – and as a result, the people with money lived in Tyler while their employees suffered and worked in the oil towns. Tyler was booming with professionals and their families – by 1933 the population had swelled to 25,000.

It appears that Alma Mary's family owned the property located behind the Manor and decided to cash in on the need for rental housing. The plans for the garage apartments – there were three of them back in the day (one has since burned down) – were drawn up by her son Richard McLeroy. Each apartment was of similar size, about 700 square feet, but each had a unique floorplan.

They've been rental housing ever since...

MISCELLANY

The Other Brothers

And what became of the other five sons of John George?

John George Jr. died at the young age of 20, in Tyler, in 1873 – and I have yet to discover the cause of death.

Theodore was a prominent lawyer in Tyler and eventually became a judge in Houston. He passed away in 1942.

Gus moved to Arkansas and sold furniture, and passed away in 1930.

Alexander met the most financial success of the family. Before oil, East Texas was all about agriculture. In 1890, Alex founded The Woldert Company, which had a canning factory in Lindale and grew, packaged, and shipped all manner of produce. Between 1898 and 1906 he built the beautiful brick building you see right across Woldert Street from the Manor. Now a law office, the house features stained glass windows, an upstairs billiards room (now the law library), steam heating through a boiler in the basement, and a copper voice tube that connected the kitchen to Mr. Woldert's room. The Wolderts living in Tyler today all herald from Alex, and many of the "Woldert" landmarks in Tyler are due to Alex's generous donations of money. Alex died in 1939.

Finally, Albert – youngest of the brothers – became a physician. An expert on malaria and tropical diseases, he served as Tyler's City Physician, cheerily donning a rubber suit and quarantining anybody in town with a suspicious sniffle. Albert built and lived in the house just east of the Manor, passing away in 1959. A historian just like Will, in 1948 Albert published a still-widely respected book, *A History of Smith County and East Texas*.